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Miss M. V Sayles.

The Worker in Sandalwood

By
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HE WORKER IN SANDALWOOD

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HE good curé of Terminaison says that this tale of Hyacinthe's is all a dream. But then Madame points triumphantly to the little cabinet of sandalwood in the corner of her room. It has stood there for many years now, and the dust has gathered in the fine lines of the little birds' feathers, and softened the petals of the lilies carved at the corners. And the wood has taken on a golden gleam like the memory of a sunset.

"What of that my friend?" says Madame, pointing to the cabinet. And the old curé bows his head.

"It may be so. God is very good," he says gently. But he is never quite sure what he may believe.

On that winter day long ago, Hyacinthe was quite sure of one thing, and that was that the workshop was very cold. There was no fire in it, and only one little lamp when the early dark drew on. The tools were so cold they scorched his fingers, and his feet were so cold he danced clumsily in the shavings to warm them. He was a great clumsy boy of fourteen, dark-faced, dull-eyed, and uncared for. He was clumsy because it is impossible to be graceful when you are growing very fast and have not enough to eat. He was dull-eyed because all eyes met his unlovingly. He was uncared for because no one knew the beauty of his soul. But his heavy young hands could carve things like birds and flowers perfectly. On this winter evening he was just wondering if he might lay aside the tools, and creep home to the cold loft where he slept, when he heard Pierre L'Oreillard's voice shouting outside.

"Be quick, be quick, and open the door, thou *imbécile*. It is I, thy master."

"*Oui, mon mâitre*," said Hyacinthe, and he shambled to the door and opened it.

"Slow worm!" cried Pierre, and he cuffed Hyacinthe as he passed in. Hyacinthe rubbed his head and said nothing. He was used to blows. He wondered why his master was in the workshop at that time of day instead of drinking brandy at the Cinq Chateaux.

Pierre L'Oreillard had a small heavy bundle under his arm, wrapped in sacking, and then in burlap, and then in fine soft cloths. He laid it on a pile of shavings, and unfolded it carefully; and a dim sweetness filled the dark shed and hung heavily in the thin winter sunbeams.

"It is a piece of wood," said Hyacinthe in slow surprise. He knew that such wood had never been seen in Terminaison.

Pierre L'Oreillard rubbed the wood respectfully with his knobby fingers.

"It is sandalwood," he explained to Hyacinthe, pride of knowledge making him quite amiable, "a most precious wood that grows in warm countries, thou great goblin. Smell it, idiot. It is sweeter than cedar. It is to make a cabinet for the old Madame at the big house."

"Be quick, be quick and open the door, thou imbécile. It is I, thy master."

"*Oui, mon mâitre,*" said the dull Hyacinthe.

"Thy great hands shall shape and smooth the wood, *nigaud*, and I will render it beautiful," said Pierre, puffing out his chest.

"Yes, master," answered Hyacinthe humbly, "and when is it to be ready for Madame?"

"Madame will want it perhaps next week, for that is Christmas. It is to be finished and ready on the holy festival, great sluggard. Hearest thou?" and he cuffed Hyacinthe's ears again furiously.

Hyacinthe knew that the making of the cabinet would fall to him, as most of the other work did. When Pierre L'Oreillard was gone he touched the strange sweet wood and at last laid his cheek against it, while the frangrance caught his breath. "How it is beautiful!" said Hyacinthe, and for a moment his eyes glowed, and he was happy. Then the light passed, and with bent head he shuffled back to his bench through a foam of white shavings curling almost to his knees.

"Madame will want the cabinet for Christmas," repeated Hyacinthe to him-

self, and fell to work harder than ever, though it was so cold in the shed that his breath hung in the air like a little silvery cloud. There was a tiny window on his right, through which, when it was clear of frost, one looked on Terminaison; and that was cheerful, and made him whistle. But to the left, through the chink of the ill-fitting door, there was nothing to be seen but the forest, and the road dying away in it, and the trees moving heavily under the snow.

Brandy was good at the Cinq Chateaux and Pierre L'Oreillard gave Hyacinthe plenty of directions, but no further help with the cabinet.

"That is to be finished for Madame at the festival, sluggard," said he every day, cuffing Hyacinthe about the head, "finished, and with a prettiness about the corners, hearest thou, *ourson?*"

"Yes, monsieur," said Hyacinthe in his slow way; "I will try to finish it. But if I hurry I shall spoil it."

Pierre's little eyes flickered. "See that it is done, and done properly. I suffer from a delicacy of the constitution and a little feebleness of the legs these days, so

that I cannot handle the tools properly. I must leave this work to thee, *gâcheur.* And stand up and touch a hand to thy cap when I speak to thee, slow-worm."

"Yes, monsieur," said Hyacinthe wearily.

It is hard to do all the work and to be beaten into the bargain. And fourteen is not very old. Hyacinthe worked on at the cabinet with his slow and exquisite skill. But on Christmas eve he was still at work, and the cabinet unfinished.

"The master will beat me," thought Hyacinthe, and he trembled a little, for Pierre's beatings were cruel. "But if I hurry, I shall spoil the wood, and it is too beautiful to be spoiled."

But he trembled again when Pierre came into the workshop, and he stood up and touched his cap.

"Is the cabinet finished, *imbécile?*" asked Pierre. And Hyacinthe answered in a low voice, "No, it is not finished yet, monsieur."

"Then work on it all night, and show it to me completed in the morning, or thy bones shall mourn thine idleness," said Pierre, with a wicked look in his little

eyes. And he shut Hyacinthe into the shed with a smoky lamp, his tools, and the sandalwood cabinet.

It was nothing unusual. He had been often left before to finish a piece of work overnight while Pierre went off to his brandies. But this was Christmas eve, and he was very tired. Even the scent of the sandalwood could not make him fancy he was warm. The world seemed to be a black place, full of suffering and despair.

"In all the world, I have no friend," said Hyacinthe, staring at the flame of the lamp. "In all the world, there is no one to care whether I live or die. In all the world, no place, no heart, no love. O kind God, is there a place, a love for me in another world?"

I hope you feel very sorry for Hyacinthe, lonely, and cold, and hungry, shut up in the workshop on the eve of Christmas. He was but an overgrown, unhappy child. And I think with old Madame that for unhappy children, at this season, no help seems too divine for faith.

"There is no one to care for me," said Hyacinthe. And he even looked at the

chisel in his hand, thinking that by a touch of that he might lose it all, and be at peace, somewhere not far from God. Only it was forbidden. Then came the tears, and great sobs that shook him, so that he scarcely heard the gentle rattling of the latch.

He stumbled to the door, opening it on the still woods and the frosty stars. And a lad who stood outside in the snow said, "I see you are working late, comrade. May I come in?"

Hyacinthe brushed his ragged sleeve across his eyes and nodded "Yes." Those little villages strung along the great river see strange wayfarers at times. And Hyacinthe said to himself that surely here was such a one. Blinking into the stranger's eyes, he lost for a flash the first impression of youth, and received one of some incredible age or sadness. But the wanderer's eyes were only quiet, very quiet, like the little pools in the wood where the wild does went to drink. As he turned within the door, smiling at Hyacinthe and shaking some snow from his cap, he did not seem to be more than sixteen or so.

"It is very cold outside," he said. "There is a big oak tree on the edge of the fields that has split in the frost and frightened all the little squirrels asleep there. Next year it will make an even better home for them. And see what I found close by!" He opened his fingers and showed Hyacinthe a little sparrow lying unruffled in the palm.

"*Pauvrette!*" said the dull Hyacinthe. "*Pauvrette!* Is it then dead?" He touched it with a gentle forefinger.

"No," answered the strange boy, "it is not dead. We will put it here among the shavings, not far from the lamp, and it will be well by the morning."

He smiled at Hyacinthe again, and the shambling lad felt dimly as if the scent of the sandalwood were sweeter, and the lamp-flame clearer. But the stranger's eyes were only quiet, quiet.

"Have you come far?" asked Hyacinthe. "It is a bad season for traveling, and the wolves are out."

"A long way," said the other. "A long, long way. I heard a child cry——"

"There is no child here," put in Hyacinthe. "Monsieur L'Oreillard says chil-

"I see you are working late, comrade. May I come in?"

dren cost too much money. But if you have come far, you must need food and fire, and I have neither. At the Cinq Chateaux you will find both."

The stranger looked at him again with those quiet eyes, and Hyacinthe fancied that his face was familiar. "I will stay here," he said; "you are late at work, and you are unhappy."

"Why as to that," answered Hyacinthe, rubbing his cheeks and ashamed of his tears, "most of us are sad at one time or another, the good God knows. Stay here and welcome if it pleases you; and you may take a share of my bed, though it is no more than a pile of balsam boughs and an old blanket in the loft. But I must work at this cabinet, for the drawers must be finished and the handles put on and the corners carved, all by the holy morning; or my wages will be paid with a stick."

"You have a hard master," put in the other, "if he would pay you with blows upon the feast of Noel."

"He is hard enough," said Hyacinthe, "but once he gave me a dinner of sausages and white wine; and once, in the

summer, melons. If my eyes will stay open, I will finish this by morning. Stay with me an hour or so, comrade, and talk to me of your travels, so that the time may pass more quickly."

"I will tell you of the country where I was a child," answered the stranger.

And while Hyacinthe worked, he told, —of sunshine and dust, of the shadow of vine-leaves on the flat white walls of a house; of rosy doves on the roof; of the flowers that come out in the spring, anemones crimson and blue, and white cyclamen in the shadow of the rocks; of the olive, the myrtle, and the almond; until Hyacinthe's fingers ceased working, and his sleepy eyes blinked wonderingly.

"See what you have done, comrade," he said at last, "you have told me of such pretty things that I have done but little work for an hour. And now the cabinet will never be finished, and I shall be beaten."

"Let me help you," smiled the other, "I also was bred a carpenter."

At first Hyacinthe would not, fearing to trust the sweet wood out of his own hands. But at length he allowed the

stranger to fit in one of the little drawers. And so deftly was it done that Hyacinthe pounded his fists on the bench in admiration. "You have a pretty knack," he cried. "It seemed as if you did but hold the drawer in your hands a moment, and hey! ho! it jumped into its place."

"Let me fit in the other little drawers while you rest awhile," said the stranger. So Hyacinthe curled up among the shavings, and the other boy fell to work upon the little cabinet of sandalwood.

Hyacinthe was very tired. He lay still among the shavings, and thought of all the other boy had told him, of the hillside flowers, the laughing leaves, the golden bloom of the anise, and the golden sun upon the roads until he was warm. And all the time the boy with the quiet eyes was at work upon the cabinet, smoothing, fitting, polishing.

"You do better work than I," said Hyacinthe once, and the stranger answered, "I was lovingly taught." And again Hyacinthe said, "It is growing towards morning. In a little while I will get up and help you."

"Lie still and rest," said the other boy. And Hyacinthe lay still. His thoughts began to slide into dreams, and he woke with a little start, for there seemed to be music in the shed; though he could not tell whether it came from the strange boy's lips, or from the shabby tools as he used them, or from the stars.

"The stars are much paler," thought Hyacinthe. "Soon it will be morning, and the corners are not carved yet. I must get up and help this kind one in a little moment. Only the music and the sweetness seem to fold me close, so that I may not move."

Then behind the forest there shone a pale glow of dawn, and in Terminaison the church bells began to ring. "Day will soon be here," thought Hyacinthe, "and with day will come Monsieur L'Oreillard and his stick. I must get up and help, for even yet the corners are not carved."

But the stranger looked at him, smiling as though he loved him, and laid his brown finger lightly on the four empty corners of the cabinet. And Hyacinthe saw the squares of reddish wood ripple and heave and break, as little clouds when

the wind goes through the sky. And out of them thrust forth the little birds, and after them the lilies, for a moment living; but even as Hyacinthe looked, settling back into the sweet reddish-brown wood. Then the stranger smiled again, laid all the tools in order, and, opening the door, went away into the woods.

Hyacinthe crept slowly to the door. The winter sun, half risen, filled all the frosty air with splendid gold. Far down the road a figure seemed to move amid the glory, but the splendor was such that Hyacinthe was blinded. His breath came sharply as the glow beat on the wretched shed, on the old shavings, on the cabinet with the little birds and the lilies carved at the corners.

He was too pure of heart to feel afraid. But "Blessed be the Lord," whispered Hyacinthe, clasping his slow hands, "for he hath visited and redeemed His people. But who will believe?"

Then the sun of Christ's day rose gloriously, and the little sparrow came from his nest among the shavings and shook his wings to the light.

THE END

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